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VOLUNTEERS IN THE COURTS *News*

Winter 2001

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Court System Colleagues Share Gift of Time

by: Cheri A. Timpel, personnel officer, Director of State Courts Office

Twice last year, court employees—including judges, court reporters, and staff—came to the aid of critically ill colleagues by donating earned but unused leave time. The caring and compassion of these individuals was heartwarming.

The Catastrophic Leave Program provides an opportunity for court employees to donate annual leave, personal days, and Saturday legal holiday time to court system colleagues who have used up all eligible leave time to cover an extended absence due to a serious medical condition.

Donations are used to bridge the gap during a medical leave of absence for which no other eligible paid leave benefit or replacement income is immediately available. Sick leave may not be donated.

There are some restrictions on these donations:

- a court employee may donate no more than 24 hours of leave credits (that amount is pro-rated for less than full-time employees);
- leave credits must be donated in whole-hour increments;
- leave credits will be used in the sequence they are received;
- donated leave credits will be deducted from a donor's leave accounting balance when the credits are actually used by the recipient; and
- donated but unneeded credits are returned to the donor.

The Catastrophic Leave Program is implemented in individual cases as needed. For more information, contact the Human Resources Department at (608) 266-9795.

Court of Appeals, Clerk's Office 'Adopt' Families for Christmas

Judges, staff attorneys, and staff at the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, as well as staff at the Office of the Clerk of the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, "adopted" needy families for the holidays in lieu of exchanging gifts among themselves.

Staff Attorney Deborah C. Moritz, who works for Districts I and II of the Court of Appeals, suggested participation in the Family-to-Family Christmas program. In 2000, the group's third year to take part in the charity, the presents collected for just one large family filled a van.

The program identifies families in Dane County who are in need of assistance (in 2000, there were more than 120 families identified) and then matches volunteers with each family.

The staff attorneys, judges, and staff at District IV adopted one family, the Clerk's Office adopted one family, and a number of judges, staff attorneys, and assistants adopted additional families on their own.

Volunteers receive a list with the first names of the family members, their clothing sizes, their wishes for gifts, and the name of the grocery store where they shop. The volunteers purchase and wrap the gifts and also provide gift certificates to the grocery store for Christmas meals. These items are delivered to a central location one week before Christmas and are delivered to the families by social workers and other volunteers.

Volunteer Advocates, Friends for Victims

Liz Schmidt has volunteered at the Center Against Sexual and Domestic Abuse (CASDA) in Superior for more than a decade. When her husband died 14 years ago Schmidt decided she wanted to get more involved in her community, so she called CASDA, received training, and opened up her home to victims of sexual and domestic abuse. Her house was a "Safe Home" for several years, until the center opened a shelter. Since then, Schmidt has been one of approximately 20 volunteers who meet victims at the police station, attend court proceedings with clients, answer the crisis line, staff the shelter, and provide transportation.

When attending court proceedings with victims, volunteers explain what will happen, what kinds of questions will be asked, who will be present, and what the legal terms mean. More than anything else, though, they lend support to the victim. Speaking of her court experiences, Schmidt said, "[the client] just felt more comfortable if she knew she had someone in her corner."

CASDA's 32-hour training program teaches volunteers about the dynamics of domestic abuse, typical behaviors in victims, how the justice system handles these cases, and what other community resources and information are available. CASDA staff, police officers, district attorneys, and staff of the county Victim/Witness Office conduct the training. "Volunteers learn how to be supportive and non-judgmental," said Cindy O'Brien, CASDA's volunteer coordinator. Some of the most supportive volunteers, O'Brien said, are former CASDA clients. "It's good for victims to see a success story—that there's a way out of an abusive relationship," she said.

CASDA volunteers are a group of dedicated people, especially the on-call advocates, according to O'Brien. These volunteers receive calls any time during the night and weekend asking them to meet with victims. "A lot [of on-call volunteers] have jobs during the day ...where they can't come in late, even when they've been up much of the night," she said. The volunteers themselves also receive support from CASDA through in-service programs that help them deal with the personal toll of working so closely with emotional and physical trauma. A staff person is available around the clock to provide support for the volunteers.

Halfway across the state, in Merrill, volunteers at Haven, Inc., provide similar services to victims in their community. They also help with fundraising and promote awareness of the organization and of the issues surrounding domestic violence through presentations to students and community groups, and a weekly radio show. Haven volunteers—who numbered more than 120 last year—receive training that focuses on the importance of maintaining confidentiality, makes them aware of the risks of volunteering in this capacity, and familiarizes them with the realities of

violent relationships. These realities are sometimes already well known. "Many volunteers will tell us that they have ...been exposed to similar situations," said Linda Cottrell, volunteer coordinator at Haven.

CASDA and Haven are two of the more than 20 programs in Wisconsin that monitor domestic violence and sexual abuse cases and offer assistance to victims through hundreds of volunteers, both attorneys and non-attorneys, who serve as ombudsmen and advocates. While some volunteers work directly with victims, others participate indirectly by attending court proceedings to record victims' names, charges filed, and details on future hearings so that organizations can use this information to advocate for policy and system changes.

Both types of volunteers find great satisfaction in the work. "It's something that is really important," Schmidt said, and then shared a story. She had received a call from CASDA staff about an older woman who was living in a house where violence was occurring.

They had helped the woman find an apartment of her own and asked Schmidt to visit her, just to talk. That was eight years ago.

Schmidt still visits this woman, now her friend, in her safe home. "She is very precious to me."

To learn more about using volunteers in programs that assist domestic violence victims, contact O'Brien at (715) 392-3136 or Cottrell at (715) 536-1300. To receive information about funding from the Violence Against Women Act, contact the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance at (608) 266-3323 or visit oja.state.wi.us. To find court-related volunteer opportunities in your community, visit the Wisconsin court system Web site at www.courts.state.wi.us/media/vol_courts.html.

People's Law School Connects Justice System, Community

by: Sarah Maguire, intern, Director of State Courts Office

Richland County cosmetologist Deb Niemeyer received a free crash course in law this year thanks to a program organized by Judge Edward E. Leineweber. Leineweber established the People's Law School 2000, a lecture series on specific areas of law that many people may find themselves confronting.

"There is always a need for people to understand the law better and what their rights are," said Niemeyer, who attended all but one seminar. "I didn't know an awful lot, and I thought I could learn something."

Niemeyer has two teen-age boys, and she brought them to seminars that she believed would interest them. "When I was in high school, I never learned the history of the law, at least not that I remember," she said. "I felt it was important for them to come."

Linda Gentes, coordinator for continuing education at the University of Wisconsin-Richland, said programs of this sort are extremely important for the community. "People are in court more than they ever used to be," said Gentes, who helped Leineweber organize the program. "This program helps take away the mystery so they can understand the system."

Leineweber said he established this program to give people an opportunity to get into the courthouse and acquaint themselves with court proceedings. "It's amazing to me the number of times people in the community tell me they've never been in the courtroom," he said. "It's important to let people know that the courtroom is not a dungeon where people are strung up and flogged."

Gentes said one of the program's greatest successes was the wide array of subjects available. "No matter what, the quantity of knowledge [on the law] is so vast you can't know it all," she said. The topics were designed to reflect the court's docket, according to Leineweber.

Attorneys presented on substantive issues ranging from juvenile court to probate court. Approximately 20 to 35 people attended each lecture. "The sense I got was that people understood what the presenters were telling them," he said. "Lots of questions focused on their personal situations, but I expected that."

About 10 attorneys who regularly practice in Richland County Circuit Court presented the seminars—some more than once. William Rudolph, a civil litigation attorney, gave three seminars. Each lecture was very different and attracted a variety of people, he said.

Everyone from aspiring judges to those who were simply interested in the topic attended Rudolph's seminars.

The time-honored Socratic method worked well for Rudolph and was a great deal of fun, he said. "The folks in it really participated," Rudolph said, adding that he valued the experiences.

"I love teaching, and so I had a really enjoyable experience inter-changing with the community," he said. "I've found that people really like to learn, and the law is something that affects everyone."

In addition to the question-and-answer format, Rudolph and Leineweber recommend using overhead projectors, audio-visual technology, hypothetical situations, and, of course, leaving plenty of time for questions. "There was some concern about whether there would be too many people who wanted free legal advice, but that wasn't the case," Rudolph said.

Programs such as the People's Law School are a good way to reconnect to the community and instill public confidence in the legal system, according to *Public Trust and Confidence in the Justice System*, a report released in October 2000 by the Office of the Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, the Director of State Courts Office, the State Bar of Wisconsin, and the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, Inc. (The report is available on the court system Web site at www.courts.state.wi.us).

A 1998 American Bar Association survey found that 43 percent of people believe that most lawyers do not contribute enough to their communities through donations of time, money, or legal services. Over half of people who were surveyed said that courts were out of touch with local communities.

Rudolph said the legal profession needs more public-minded people. "I feel that we all need to contribute in life," Rudolph said. "The judge certainly contributed his time, and I felt a sense of duty to offer some time."

Leineweber and Gentes attended nearly every lecture. "I learned a lot," Gentes said. "It's surprising how much authority the district attorney has before a case comes to court."

Almost every lecture was videotaped. Richland County residents have already asked to check out the tapes, which are stored in the courthouse. Leineweber said his ultimate goal is to create a professionally edited video series to keep in the courthouse.

Gentes said scheduling the lectures was the biggest challenge. "Our biggest decision was when to hold it. Everyone is always busy." She recommends holding similar lecture series from February to April. "In the fall, it's impossible to avoid the Packer's schedule," Gentes said. "In the spring,

people are ready to leave the house."

Leineweber said Richland County is planning to continue its public outreach programming and is considering holding another lecture series in a few years.

Niemeyer, the cosmetologist, said she is glad that these types of programs are continuing. "Those that didn't attend these seminars," Niemeyer said, "really missed out on some good education."

For more information, call Leineweber at (608) 647-2626.

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